

Table of Contents

'Rated X by an All-White Jury'	1
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'Rated X by an All-White Jury'

By Stewart Home

Following his review of Horace Ové's *Pressure*, Stewart Home delves into the video vaults once again to excavate another dangerous mix of transgressive politics, exploitation, film, counter-culture and the avant-garde

Lensed in 1970 and released the following year, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* still suffers from its notorious reputation as the 'first blaxploitation' movie. *Sweetback* hasn't really received the recognition it deserves both because of director Melvin Van Peebles' ability to divide and polarise critics, and the ongoing effect of often unconscious white racism upon its reception. Among *Sweetback*'s more perceptive capsule critics can be numbered Michael J. Weldon who writes in *The Psychotronic Video Guide* (St Martin's Griffin, New York 1996, page 550):

'It was 'Rated X by an all-white jury', stars 'the black community', made over \$4 million, and started the black action movie trend. It starts with the 12 year-old *Sweetback* enjoying sex with a hooker. Later he does live sex shows in a California whorehouse and is arrested for a crime he didn't commit. He kills a cop after seeing him beat a black revolutionary... Most of this overlong movie is *Sweetback* (played by the director) running towards the border while funky instrumentals by Earth, Wind and Fire are heard. Van Peebles uses 'underground' techniques (freeze frames, solarization, split screen...) and the nudity and violence probably would have resulted in an R rating if it was a white-cast movie...'

In the film, it is 10 year-old *Sweetback* (played by Van Peebles' then 13 year old son Mario), who loses his virginity to a 40 year old prostitute, and to my eyes he doesn't look like he's enjoying it, but I will return to this below. Where I agree with Weldon is on the necessity of using underground and/or art house references in discussing *Sweetback*, something both director Melvin Van Peebles and his more scathing detractors tend to gloss over.

Weldon certainly isn't the only critic to note the need for 'high brow' reference points when discussing Van Peebles. Karl and Philip French in their *Cult Movies* (Pavilion Books, London 1999, page 205) observe of *Sweetback* that it is a:

'rebarbative one-man-show, a low-budget film. is part crude exploitation skinflick, part European art movie. It combines soft-core sex with slow motion, speeded-up camerawork, jump cuts, shots in negative and a total disregard for conventional narration...'

By way of contrast, Mikel J Koven in *Blaxploitation Films* (Pocket Essentials, Harpenden 2001, pages 14-15), says of *Sweetback*:

'I really hate this film... The first scene of the film shows a very young (12-14 year-old) boy having sex with an old prostitute. The boy is totally nude, as is the woman, and we see explicit shots of him between her legs, humping away. Whether the kid was actually having sex with her is not the issue: the image presented is of a real nude kid between an older woman's legs. This kind of sexual exploitation of children is one of the few places I draw the line. It also occurs to me that, despite Van Peebles' claim that the film was rated X due to the film's unrelenting realism, this his 'all-white jury' wanted to suppress the ideas of the film, the truth is more banal - the film is more pornography than *Blaxploitation*. Conventional wisdom on the film (i.e. Film and Media Studies folk) like to note that the film's box-office success indicates that it spoke to a contemporary black audience. It strikes me that the \$1.5 million it made domestically was due more to curiosity about the sex in the film, than an engagement with the socio-politics of it...'

[IMAGE] While *Sweetback*'s opening scene clearly is problematic, it needs to be addressed in the context of both the entire film and the time at which the movie was made. I return to this below. Likewise, while it would be true to state that Vilgot Sjöman's art house feature *I Am Curious - Yellow* (1967) became an American box-office sensation due to its occasional explicit sex scenes, the same claim doesn't wash when made about *Sweetback*. The successful court cases that resulted in *I Am Curious - Yellow* being widely shown in the States opened the floodgates for hardcore pornography. By the time *Sweetback* was released any adult wishing to see a hardcore skinflick in an American cinema could do so. *Sweetback* contains nudity and softcore sex, but what attracted its initial audience was the novelty of a black lead who not only stood up to racist cops but got away with killing them (to defend himself and his community). Koven in his *Blaxploitation Films* book gives the impression that he doesn't care about the colour of anybody's skin, as long as their mind is 'white', an attitude Van Peebles self-consciously kicks against. Indeed, Koven even claims that:

'The 'Man' - in this case explicitly the Police, but more generally all white folk - tries to 'bleed' Sweetback... But as the archetypal black renegade, Sweetback will stick it to 'the Man' before he sticks it to Sweetback.' (Page 14).

This is absurd, the notion of 'the Man' invokes the authorities and institutionalised racism in its various forms (be it slavery or be it neo-colonialism). If Van Peebles had wished to use racist cops as representative of all whites, he wouldn't have included scenes where white Hell's Angels (albeit after an initial misunderstanding) aid Sweetback. It should go without saying that treating the victims of bigotry as victimisers is a classic racist trope, and Koven ought to be ashamed of himself for invoking it. If, as it appears, Koven is upset because Van Peebles wants 'the Man' to take his foot out of my ass (in other words, Koven sees Van Peebles as a 'nasty man' because this would-be film critic doesn't like revolutionaries like Van Peebles who wish to put an end to all racial and class exploitation), all I can say is didums.

Incidentally, in *Blaxploitation Films*, Koven also disses *Dolemite* (1975, directed by D'Unville Martin). Like *Sweetback*, this Rudy Ray Moore vehicle is another truly great Afro-American movie of the seventies. This is what Koven says about *Dolemite* on page 64 of his book:

'This is perhaps one of the worst films I have ever seen... Watching *Dolemite* was the only time during the preparation of this book that I actually felt white. This is not a movie white folk are welcome to - not that it is filled with some kind of reverse racist 'white-bashing' (often that can be quite enjoyable), but the forms of speech, the modes of presentation, the emphases and the fact that this was so successful with its intended audience say to me there is something I am clearly not getting. (Unless of course, Moore's greatest joke was on 'whitey', like white folk trying to convince people that Andy Kaufman was a genius). 0/5.'

One of the things Koven is clearly not getting is that race and class are inextricably linked, and that what leaves him feeling unwelcome when he watches *Sweetback* or *Dolemite* are his own narrow minded views as a liberal and centred bourgeois subject. This has nothing to do with race and everything to do with racism. Is it really necessary to state yet again that race isn't real, but because of racism it is experienced as real? Given Koven's inability to understand any of this, he ought to stick to writing about Hollywood crapola by the likes of Martin Scorsese, and stay away from proletarian post-modernism.

Sweetback saw its first British release as a video on the M.I.A label in 1998, with the film being promoted as: 'The controversial movie that kick-started Modern Black Cinema.' M.I.A are a straight ahead popular film label, whose releases are often dismissed by no-brainer bourgeois critics as 'no-brainer action movies featuring the likes of Chuck Norris', and what M.I.A. put out is rarely

treated seriously by self-styled contemporary cultural commentators. Now that *Sweetback* has been released on DVD by the British Film Institute, the film is likely to receive some more serious critical reappraisals, which is to be welcomed. There are, of course, purists who will bemoan the fact that the BFI are recuperating revolutionary culture. We saw carping of this type when the Situationist International exhibition was toured between the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the London and Boston ICAs in 1989. All of anarchism can be found in the idea that it is possible to live differently in this world, which necessarily accompanies purism about the dissemination of a revolutionary praxis through cultural channels. But if the anarchists can tolerate each other, they are able to tolerate almost anyone and anything other than broad swathes of people gravitating towards the theory and practice of proletarian revolution. The aim of revolutionary activity is to overflow all capitalist canalisation, but until we experience disalienation as an accomplished fact, we still have to live out the contradictions of capitalism. As a consequence I see the BFI attempting to absorb *Sweetback* into the institution of art as a progressive step from a proletarian perspective, since it results in the bourgeoisie having to address some of its own contradictions and limits. It also gets the film out to a new audience, at least some of whom will be raring to abolish the racist and classist society in which we currently live. Likewise, it seems unlikely the BFI would be releasing *Sweetback* without some of those working at the organisation being (at the very least unconsciously) sympathetic to proletarian perspectives and possibly even hoping to set the Institute in total contradiction with itself. That said, no matter how revolutionary any individual working at the BFI might be, in this pre-revolutionary period they are constrained by the canalisation that creates both the institution of art in general and the particular part of it within which they now work. A number of the BFI's recent releases indicate radicals gaining some kind of voice in the Institute, and this is a welcome change from its more conservative tenor in the past. We'll know the radicals at the BFI are really gaining ground when it starts putting out contemporary releases that are every bit as incendiary as *Sweetback*; inevitably it is easier for the conservative elements within this organisation to reluctantly acquiesce to the reissue of the revolutionary residue of yesteryear than the circulation of inflammable materials that are brand spanking new. Pleasingly, it looks like the reactionary brand of film appreciation associated with bourgeois hacks like Colin McCabe has had its day. Cretins like McCabe simply aren't credible any more.

The BFI's packaging of *Sweetback* sets the tone for a slew of serious reappraisals of the movie, with the back cover blurb stating: '*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* has a distinctive gritty style in keeping with the independent spirit of the times, combining the streetwise realism of Paul Morrissey, with the sexual hysteria of Russ Meyer.' These are more or less the right reference points for the movie, and mark an ongoing shift away from Van Peebles' comic insistence on his own originality, a form of signifying he's kept up for years and that is evident everywhere from the 30 minute documentary about him on this DVD via interviews in books such as *That's Blacksploitation: Roots of the Baadasssss Tude* by Darius James (St Martin's Griffin, New York 1995) back through to his own book of the film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Canongate Books, Edinburgh 1996, but first US edition 1971). Van Peebles on Van Peebles is a hoot, and he sends himself up in the extras feature on this DVD by among other things re-enacting as a fully clothed old man the opening sequence to *Sweetback* with a naked white woman who has a paper bag over her head (the original movie featured a black woman without a paper bag). Projecting an image of himself as unremittingly sleazy clearly amuses Van Peebles, and it simultaneously provides his critics with a golden opportunity to ignore the many things that are worth engaging with in his work, so that they might instead attack a straw man. In the book of the film Van Peebles is a little freer and looser in indicating what he actually thought he was doing when he made *Sweetback*. As the text proceeds, Van Peebles starts modifying and correcting what he's already said. For example as regards the script supervisor who didn't cut it, Van Peebles announces:

'Actually I didn't fire him... I turned him into an extra...' (Page 63).

Next he admits to a bigger whopper:

'I told a lie. At the beginning I swore that I wasn't going to use 16mm...' (Page 64).

Van Peebles enjoys the burlesque of pretending his film work is without precedent and emerged from him being untutored and pissed off with Hollywood, but in print (if not always in person) he allows this put-on to slip:

'I think it was Eisenstein who said that a film can be made or broke in the editing room...' (Page 75).

By page 84 Van Peebles is writing:

'...a Cezanne orange isn't like any other orange. And it only makes sense in the image itself, in the visual, the actual visual. It's not literature, it's painting. Some of the heaviest cats who have ever been in cinema defy description in purely verbal story line terms. Just as an orange only gives us the vaguest inkling of a Cezanne orange until we see it, verbal descriptions of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* or Kurosawa's *MacBeth* don't begin to touch the cinematic dimensions of the films themselves, no more than a concert can encompass a novel by Richard Wright. But words are cheap, like they say, and film's expensive. So we continue to try to make one medium do the work of another. The cinematic qualities in American films are usually by-products because an American film is usually literature first...'

Darius James in *That's Blaxploitation* calls *Sweetback* an 'urban visual-poem' (page 8) and this seems to me a good way to understand the film. It is pointless comparing *Sweetback* to studio produced blaxploitation fodder like *Shaft* (1971, directed by Gordon Parks Senior) or more recent work by Afro-American directors like Melvin's son Mario Van Peebles, the real line of development lies elsewhere (and not just in the 1920s black American director Oscar Micheaux as both Melvin and Mario Van Peebles might have you believe). Stan Brakhage has something to do with this, as does Jack Smith and also George and Mike Kuchar. Van Peebles's nearest contemporary is not Gordon Parks Junior (great as his 1972 cocaine actioner *Superfly* undoubtedly is) but John Waters, the maverick director responsible for kitsch classics like *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and *Pink Flamingoes* (1972), prior to his partial absorption by the studio system. While not quite a totally out of the closet, in your face and up your ass, screaming queen, Van Peebles is no shrinking violet when it comes to polymorphous cinematic perversity. An obsession with sexual transgression and gender confusion is something he shares with Smith, the Kuchar brothers, Warhol, Morrissey and Waters. After all, the sex show at the brothel at the start of *Sweetback* features a 'Good Dyke Fairy Godmother'. In the shooting script included in the book of the film, the scene is described this way:

'A freak show is going on in the living room. A dingy red carpet has been placed in the center of the room to imply a stage, and strangely enough, it works. We have the impression we are watching theatre, not as it is now, but as it once might have been, a morality play or something like that out of the Middle Ages... the pageant play unfolds. A lesbian picks up a girl on a bench. They walk in the park. The lesbian persuades the girl to go up to her room and they make love. The exhausted girl finally falls asleep, the lesbian rolls from beside the girl, she kneels on the dingy carpet. She holds her hands and begins to pray. The lights go off in the living room. Some of the women spectators squeal. Then something appears in the center of the stage spotted with a flashlight. It sports an outlandish costume, a white frilly dress, perhaps from some long-ago ball or wedding, a garland of plastic flowers on its head, cardboard wings and a Fourth of July sparkler as a wand. It turns full circle. 'I am the Good Dyke Fairy Godmother,' it announces. It turns full circle again and then goes over and touches the lesbian with the wand and the lesbian turns into a man and stands up. The people lean forward

applauding and the lights come back on. The ex-lesbian awakens the girl. The girl is overjoyed at the transformation and they make love again...' (Pages 18-19).

Likewise, later on in *Sweetback* there is a chorus of black angels, not to mention three fey men, one of whom announces: 'I'm a militant queen.'

There are, of course, many influences from American independent cinema feeding into *Sweetback*. Three films strike me as being of particular importance; they are John Cassavetes's *Shadows* (1959) and two Shirley Clarke features, *The Cool World* (1963) and *Portrait Of Jason* (1967). Both *Sweetback* and *Shadows* were workshop films, opportunities for the many inexperienced members of the cast and crew to learn the craft of movie making. *Shadows* deals with the daily existence of three Afro-American siblings, two brothers and a sister, the brothers are both jazz musicians and the script was at least partially improvised. Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World* deals with life in the ghetto, while *Portrait Of Jason* is an evening in the company of a black gay hustler, who speaks straight to the camera and reveals ever more about his life and pick-ups as the film progresses and he becomes increasingly smashed. Darius James in That's Blackploitation describes *The Cool World* as:

'...an art-house product. The film is included here because one, I consider it the first modern Black film, and, two, the film links the sixties with the seventies Black film cycle, foreshadowing the work of Melvin Van Peebles and Spike Lee...' (Page 66).

That said, a re-imagining of Hollywood in a more personalised Afro-American idiom undoubtedly played a major role in the genesis of *Sweetback*. I've already invoked the Kuchar brothers who were very much concerned with reconfiguring Hollywood in personal and very idiosyncratic directions; but Jacques Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964) is equally important for the way it re-imagines both America and the Hollywood musical. It should not be forgotten that Van Peebles lived in Paris in the sixties and he made his first feature film there, *The Story Of A Three Day Pass* (1968). Inevitably both French film culture and the local revolutionary praxis impacted on the way Van Peebles continually reforges the passage between theory and practice. For those too ignorant to spot this without help, Van Peebles provides a massive clue in the form of a written citation in both French and English at the beginning of *Sweetback*:

'Sire, these lines are not a homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality ... (Traditional Prologue of the Dark Ages).'

Despite the rhetoric of realism which surrounds Van Peebles promotion of *Sweetback*, the film is a musical (Van Peebles has called it 'an opera') that intransigently breaks with dominant narrative forms, and even owes a little something to Lettrist cinema in its willingness to confront the audience. Visually *Sweetback* sits very easily alongside a broad range of independent American cinema and European art house experimentation, but the music and soundtrack's verbal play are distinctly Afro-American. That's as it should be, as theorists like Paul Gilroy have pointed out, we all have a stake in modernity.

As I've noted, one of the most pleasing aspects of the BFI's DVD reissue of *Sweetback* is the placing of the movie in a more theoretically productive art-house context, rather than as the 'first' in a generic series of 'blackploitation' actioners. With regard to this the booklet that accompanies it, and in particular Kodwo Eshun's contribution, is a useful starting point for debate. Eshun writes:

'*Sweetback* was psychedelic soul on ice, not so much an escape from the grimy streets of Watts as an intensification. And the sound mix of *Sweetback* wove discordant tone clusters and brass fanfares around the theme tune that chanted 'They bled your momma/They bled your poppa' to which Van Peebles or Brer Soul as he called himself, defiantly yelled 'Won't Bleed Me!' As film historian Ed

Guerrero noted in *Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film*, Sweetback's unvarnished vision of the lower depths of American society divided critics and captivated audiences, revealing deep seated class tension, ideological conflict and aesthetic argument. Ten-year-old Sweetback, played by Van Peebles's thirteen-year-old son Mario, is first glimpsed in a South Central Los Angeles whorehouse, within seconds, he is deflowered and named by a maternal whore, accompanied by the gospel standard *Wade in the Water*. The adult Sweetback is a dead-eyed hustler that scrapes a living as a live sex-show performer for white thrill seekers... *Muhammed Speaks*, the Nation of Islam newspaper, declared the film 'a mangled, crippled, white supremacist, non-thinking, savage, inhuman vision of black people'. Black Panther Minister of Defence, Huey P Newton, by contrast, hailed it as 'the first truly revolutionary black film' ... he read Sweetback's sexual initiation as a 'baptism into true manhood'. *Ebony* critic Leonne Bennett, writing in September 1971, on the other hand, could only see the rape of a child by a 40-year-old prostitute. Sweetback is a stud, for sure, more successful than *Midnight Cowboy's* Joe Buck (1969) but hardly heroic: instead, he is peculiarly passive, a near mute, indifferent to life, only mustering the energy to bludgeon corrupt cops when their crooked scheme goes awry... Sweetback... is a pre-political lumpen prole, not even a social bandit, merely someone to whom bad things happen...' (Pages 6-7).

Eshun is perceptive in using the archaic term 'deflowered' to describe Sweetback's sexual initiation, since contra Huey Newton it is not 'a baptism into true manhood' but rather the boy's first step into an internalised neo-colonialist slavery. At this point Sweetback is as Eshun claims 'a pre-political lumpen prole', but Newton must be read back into this partial truth; since he is in fact more or less correct in hailing Van Peebles's movie as 'the first truly revolutionary black film'. Both men make the error of failing to approach Sweetback dialectically, but they do so from opposing perspectives. Eshun freezes his point of judgment at the beginning of the film, Newton at its end. Sweetback depicts the political awakening of its eponymous hero from pre-political lumpen prole to black revolutionary. Sweetback is shown to us in the opening sequence as a victim of child abuse. He is a 10 year-old, that is to say a child who is prepubescent, forced into penetrative sex with an adult and he looks like he'd rather be doing almost anything else. At the end of this extremely unpleasant piece of sexual exploitation, we see the adult Sweetback humping the 40 year-old whore, who unlike the boy she's been abusing hasn't aged. The adult Sweetback then puts on a cap that was last seen on his 10-year old head, and gets up. Despite the overall heaviness of the scene, its dénouement is as light and deft as the transformative touches in Jean Cocteau's *Le sang d'un poète* (1932). In the next scene, the adult Sweetback is seen performing in a live sex show in a South Central brothel, and he doesn't look like he's enjoying this experience either. A body has been found outside the brothel and two white cops want to temporarily haul someone into the pen to demonstrate to their boss they are making an effort to investigate the death. Sweetback is volunteered for this duty by the exploitative Uncle Tom brothel boss Beatle. The pigs detour on their way to the station, arresting a black militant called Moo Moo who they proceed to beat up. Sweetback has been handcuffed to the suspect, and gets in the way. The filth apologise to him, and undo the cuff chaining Moo Moo to Sweetback, leaving the restraint dangling from one of Sweetback's wrists. Sweetback watches for a time as Moo Moo is worked over. Then he reacts instinctively, using the handcuffs as improvised knuckle-dusters, he bludgeons the two racist cops with them, alternating this with some swift kicks. Once the pigs have been beaten unconscious, Moo Moo addresses Sweetback with the words: 'Thanks, man. Where we goin'?' To which Sweetback responds: 'Where'd you get that 'we' shit?' Despite suffering years of sexual abuse, seeing Moo Moo being beaten up by the pigs ignited the spark of humanity that still burnt in Sweetback, but he's not yet particularly conscious of what this is, so it isn't exactly burning like a flame. Sweetback and Moo Moo separate but later they find themselves on the run together, and the film demonstrates through visuals and not words, how Sweetback regains his humanity by accepting that any real sense of self emerges from, and can only be realised in, human community.

After Moo Moo is badly injured, a black motorcyclist turns up to carry Sweetback to freedom, but Sweetback insists it's the wounded Moo Moo he should assist. In one of his rare lines of dialogue Sweetback intones: 'He's our future, Brer. Take him.' Moo Moo and Sweetback shake hands and Moo Moo rides into the night. In a conventional narrative this might very well be the point at which the film ends. Van Peebles, however, wants to draw a parallel between Sweetback as a modern day black fugitive and runaway slaves, so the cameras follow Sweetback all the way to the Mexican border, which he successfully crosses. The end card jauntily announces: 'A BAADASSSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES.' If this was a conventional review, this might very well be the point at which I'd also sign off. However, there are other matters that require addressing. It is worth noting that after being brutalised by the Man, even Beatle is shown as finding a way back to his own humanity. Likewise, the end card underlines the fact that Sweetback has won a battle but not the war. Clearly no one can be free until every last one of us is liberated. Capitalism is a totalising global system under which we all reproduce our own alienation. At the end of the film Sweetback has found his humanity but is not yet fully human. None of us will experience our species being in its multi-faceted fullness until the inherently racist class society which currently plagues us has been abolished.

Backtracking to the specific item under review, both the rear cover of the packaging accompanying the DVD, and a card which appears immediately before the film starts, carry the following message:

'Notice: In order to comply with UK law (the Protection of Children Act 1978), a number of images in the opening sequence of this film have been obscured.'

There is no further information about this or discussion of it elsewhere in the package, and this is unfortunate since it inhibits debate. Indeed the notice itself is puzzling since in 1996 Canongate issued the book of the film and included in it stills of the images the BFI has suppressed, while in 1998 M.I.A. released the film on video cassette in an uncensored British edition and with the same 18 film certificate carried by the BFI DVD release. It should go without saying that the wordings of British obscenity laws are notoriously vague, and that their interpretation seems to be very much down to the individual opinion of trial judges. That said, M.I.A. took a much greater risk in releasing an uncut version of *Sweetback* than the BFI (which is perceived by the bourgeoisie as a highly respected cultural institution, as opposed to a commercial operation aiming to make money from cinematic exploitation) would have taken had it the bottle to include the opening scene in its entirety. Works can be defended from obscenity charges on the grounds that they are of benefit as art, science or knowledge. Precedent is a further line of defence. The BFI even has the benefit of a UK as well as US precedents to invoke in terms of Sweetback's release. Despite the problematic nature of the opening sequence, I feel it should be defended from censorship since seeing it is necessary to understanding the film's historic reception. What Van Peebles depicts as fiction, does happen in reality, 10-year old boys are sometimes abused by 40 year-old women. Sweetback is a victim of ongoing sexual abuse, and the film makes no sense without the viewer understanding this. Indeed every act of sex the adult Sweetback is depicted as engaging in is shown to be unpleasant and coercive. Aside from Sweetback's work in the brothel, a woman forces him to have sex with her before she'll remove the handcuffs attached to one of his wrists, later he has sex with the female president of a chapter of Hell's Angels in front of the entire gang to avoid being beaten to a pulp and possibly even murdered. In the film's final sex scene, Sweetback is spotted by a cop, so he grabs hold of a black hippie girl and at knifepoint forces her to have sex with him in some bushes, so that the pigs pursuing him assume he is a rutting stud rather than the man they're after. Sweetback is a victim of child sexual abuse, as a result he's largely mute, appears incapable of enjoying sex, and under extreme pressure ends up reproducing the very abuse he's suffered himself. Given this I think it is legitimate to show the 10 year-old Sweetback being abused, and for a number of reasons including this, the BFI should have defended rather than censored the scene. The film features a discordant soundtrack and jarring cut-away images to ensure

that the movie is neither perceived as pornography, nor consumed as such. All of its sex scenes, not just the opening sequence of child sexual abuse, are unpleasant to watch.

That said, clearly Melvin Van Peebles using his 13 year-old son Mario to appear naked in this opening sequence was from almost all perspectives a major error of judgement (Iâd make a total exception for aesthetic judgement; but this doesnât justify such abusive behaviour, although Melvin using Mario to play the 10 year-old Sweetback against his adult version does make the surreal transformation from boy to man all the more uncanny). A 13 year old is most usually pubescent, which means in certain forms of non-hierarchical society it might be (theoretically anyway) possible to get someone of this age to consent to simulate sex with a much older woman on camera. Unfortunately we, like Van Peebles when he was making Sweetback, do not live in a free society. There are huge and legally enforced power differentials between 13 year-olds and adults, which mean that the idea of a child (and for us a 13 year-old is, among others things, a child by legal definition) consenting to sex of whatever type (hardcore or simulated) is complete and utter bollocks. There are so many pressures that might be brought to bear by an adult on a 13 year-old (and in particular by their father), that regardless of whether or not someone of this age agrees to simulated sex on camera, it amounts to coercion and therefore abuse. What Van Peebles should have done is find someone who had reached the legal age of maturity but was small and young looking, so that they might convincingly play a 10 year-old on camera (or else used animation, or found some other way to create the scene). That said, what was done is done, and it has also been widely seen, so there is little point in censoring it retrospectively.

Mario Van Peebles claims to be proud of his father, but perhaps his film about the making of *Sweetback*, called simply *Baadasssss*, is a form of unconscious revenge for being forced to appear nude in the former move as a 13 year-old. *Baadasssss* is based on the senior Van Peeblesâ book of his film and is everything Sweetback set out not to be. In his book, Melvin Van Peebles claims he got the inspiration for his movie by driving out into the desert alone and jerking off to free up his mind. In the movie of the film, Melvin takes his son Mario out into the desert and finds inspiration by simply lying in the sun. And *Baadasssss* somehow manages to go downhill from this low starting point. It is a kind of feel good father and son movie, a story of triumph over adversity, with utterly predictable plot points and a dull conventional narrative. There isnât anything in *Baadasssss* that you canât get from Melvin Van Peebles book about the making of his film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and the book is a hell of a lot better than his son's movie adaptation of it. *Baadasssss* is boring, so stick with *Sweetback* or else watch *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (1979, directed by Lucio Fulci) yet again. We need movies that make us feel uncomfortable, that is to say movies like *Sweetback* or the better parts of the Fulci oeuvre (1981âs *The Beyond*, 1982âs *The New York Ripper*). That said, another word of warning, the BFIâs *Sweetback* DVD looks in places like itâs been mastered from a video tape, the visual and sound quality are at times extremely poor. Perhaps the BFI were unable to obtain a decent master, but again we need an explanation. Iâm pleased to see *Sweetback* out on DVD in the UK, and if you havenât seen it and donât have access to the M.I.A video release or an uncut edition from elsewhere, then this is better than nothing. But come on BFI, pull yer finger out, surely you wouldnât have dared butcher the release of Pasolini's *Salo* (1975) in this way!

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song directed by Melvin Van Peebles, USA, 1971, Colour, 97 minutes, certificate 18, Â£19.99, DVD released 28 November 2005 by BFI

Baadasssss! directed by Mario Van Peebles, USA, 2003, Colour, 108 minutes, certificate 15, Â£19.99, DVD released 28 November 2005 by BFI.